

Online Dating Service

Field of the Invention

The present invention relates to methods and systems for operating an online dating service. The service is useful in acting as an intermediary
5 between individuals looking to communicate with or 'meet' one another online, but its application is not limited to this.

Background

Over the past decade, the Internet has grown rapidly as a channel of communication between individuals, for instance via 'email' or online 'chat'
10 rooms. One area in which this ability to easily communicate with others has been utilised is in facilitating individuals meeting or 'dating' one another.

There are a multitude of dating/meeting web sites on the Internet to enable individuals to meet new people. A typical service of this type provided online will have a 'population' of registered users ('members'), each user
15 having provided to the service a profile of themselves, sometimes along with a photograph, containing personal information. A member can visit the service's web site (or access the service via some other portal) and search for other members based on selected criteria (e.g. gender, sexuality, age, location, etc). Details of members having profiles matching the search criteria
20 are displayed, often accompanied by their photograph if they have provided one. The member performing the search then has an option to choose one of the members found by the search and to send an e-mail message to them or, if the selected member is also online, to initiate an online conversation ('chat'). One example of such a service is "American Singles"
25 (www.americansingles.com).

These online dating/meeting services are extremely popular as they provide members with an alternative channel through which to meet another person. They also have good potential to generate revenue for the operators

of the services, for example from member subscriptions to the service and/or from third party advertising on their websites.

The high membership numbers they have achieved demonstrates the popularity of these dating/meeting services. American Singles, for example, has "millions of members". It is recognised, however, that even though the populations are in many cases very large, only a small percentage of the membership base is available online to contact immediately at any one time. Moreover, particularly considering services having a heterosexual focus, the online activity is generally characterised by males initiating contact with another member, with females typically receiving high volumes of unwanted e-mails and online chat requests, and more males than females not receiving a response after initiating contact with another member.

This imbalance between genders and the general low percentages of populations actually online at any one time can deter potential new members from joining and deter existing members from spending time online, exacerbating the problem.

Summary of the Invention

It is a general aim of the present invention to provide an online dating service that is structured to encourage a greater percentage of the services population to remain online at any one time and to encourage a better balance in the members online (e.g a balance between male and female members online or a balance in the age groups of members online).

Unless the context dictates otherwise "dating service" as used above and in the following is intended to refer to any service intended to facilitate communication (typically of a social nature) between individuals. The communication may, but need not necessarily be conducted with the aim of arranging a face to face meeting between the individuals.

Unless the context dictates otherwise, an "online" service is a service accessible through any platform via which real time electronic communication can take place, including for example computer networks, the Internet, mobile telecommunication networks (e.g. 3G) and interactive television platforms.

5 Reference to a user being "online" is intended to refer to the state of a user when accessing a service via such a platform.

In one aspect the present invention provides a method for operating an online dating service in which two users of the service are capable of communicating with one another online (e.g. 'chatting'), the method

10 comprising transferring value from one of the users to the other user. The two users of the service are preferably both online when they communicate with one another.

In another aspect the present invention provides a computer system for operating an online dating service in which two users of the service are

15 capable of communicating with one another online (e.g. 'chatting'), the system comprising server means including respective stores for value associated with each of the users and means for transferring value from the store of one of the users to the store of the other user.

It is preferably a condition of the transfer of value that the user to whom

20 the value is being transferred (the 'receiver') is prepared to communicate (e.g. converse or 'chat') online with the user from whom the value is being transferred (the 'giver') for a predetermined minimum length of time.

The 'value' transferred may be monetary value, represented for example in a particular recognised currency or by some other points, voucher

25 or token system. In a preferred form of the invention, the transfer of value is represented in the service as a virtual version of a real world transaction. For instance the one user 'buying' the other user a virtual 'drink' might perfect the transfer of value.

The users can preferably choose the amount of value to be transferred. For instance, a user may select one of multiple predetermined value amounts, which might be represented for example by different virtual 'drinks'. The predetermined minimum time that the receiver of the value is required to communicate with the giver can be the same irrespective of the amount of value transferred or may be determined based on that amount.

Preferably the service provides each user with an online account in which their respective value balance is held. The transfer of value can then be perfected by a transfer from one user's account to the other's. Users can preferably add credit (i.e. positive value) to their account. They may pay monetary value into their account using a credit or debit card, via an online payment service such as PayPal or by electronic funds transfer (e.g. BACS) for example. Similarly, a user may withdraw value from their account, e.g. by crediting monetary value back to their debit or credit card, via an online payment service or by electronic funds transfer. Alternatively or additionally, value might be withdrawn in the form of non-monetary vouchers or tokens that can be redeemed elsewhere (either online or in the real world) for goods or services.

Where the service is being operated for commercial gain, the operator of the service may generate revenue in the conventional manner discussed above, by charging a subscription fee to users of the service and/or by selling advertising space within the service. However, the transfer of value between users of the system enables a further revenue generation model, which can replace or supplement these traditional approaches. Specifically, the operator can take a commission from each transfer of value (or at least some of them).

If revenue is generated through a commission arrangement an operator may choose to allow free subscriptions to users, or charge a lower subscription than competing services, or use the subscription fee as credit value which can be subsequently transferred to another user. This in turn is likely to encourage a greater number of users to sign up to the service.

The value transfer mechanism is also an incentive for a greater number of the registered users to remain online for longer and might also encourage a more balanced population of users online. The ability to pass value to other users, e.g. by buying them a virtual drink in exchange for conversation time, is
5 also likely to increase the number of positive responses to initial approaches.

A computer system implementing the various aspects of the invention set out above, may comprise a number of server components, which may be combined in a single server application or may be distributed between multiple applications. Similarly the server components may be physically
10 located at a single server device or distributed amongst multiple server devices. The system may also include local or distributed data storage.

The invention also provides computer software (which may comprise a single or multiple components), which when installed and run on a computer system (which may comprise a single device or multiple local and/or
15 distributed devices) causes the system to operate in accordance with one or more of the various aspects of the invention set out above.

Brief Description of the Drawing

The invention is described below, by way of example, with reference to the accompanying drawing in which:

20 Figure 1 shows a system for operating an online dating service according an embodiment of the present invention;

Figure 2 illustrates the transfer of value within the online dating service;
and

Figure 3 shows the process by which the online dating service
25 operates.

Description of an Embodiment

Referring to figure 1, an embodiment of the invention will be described. In this example, the 'platform' via which users of an online dating service communicate with one another is the Internet. The same or similar services
5 can be offered on other platforms, for instance through interactive television or over a 3G mobile communication network.

The dating service runs on a server and provides a web site-base interface for users. Multiple users can interact with the service by using a standard browser application, running for example of a desktop PC, a laptop
10 or a handheld device such as a PDA, to visit the web site of the service.

As with known online dating services, users register with the service and provide the service with personal information (name, contact details, gender, sexuality, etc) searchable by other users. The users might also provide the service with one or more photographs. Unlike existing dating
15 services, each user also pays a monetary amount into a user account held by the service. All of this user data is stored in a database accessible by the server, including the monetary value credit in their account.

The service running on the server can operate, in the manner described below, to transfer value between two users as illustrated
20 schematically in figure 2. As shown by that figure, the operator of the service takes a commission on each transfer.

Turning to figure 3 an exemplary mode of operation of the service will be described.

A first user, User A, accesses the system by visiting the dating
25 service's web site. They can search for other users within the dating service's population of users in a conventional manner, against criteria they choose, for other users with whom they might want to converse.

Once the search is completed they can select one of the users (User B) found by the search who is also online (the search may be restricted in the first instance to only return users who are currently online) and attempt to initiate an online conversation with them. Alternatively, they can select a user
5 who is not online, but with whom they would like to communicate with online in the future. This may be done within a virtual environment displayed on the web page viewed by the user and which may give the impression of being in a bar for example.

As part of the attempt to initiate a conversation, or after a conversation
10 has commenced, User A can offer to 'buy' User B a virtual 'drink' (after initiation of the conversation it is also possible for user B to offer User A a 'drink'). This may be done by selecting a specific 'drink' from an available selection.

User B can then choose whether they want to accept the offer of the
15 'drink'. If they do, they are committing themselves to a continuing online conversation with User A for a predetermined minimum amount of time. In this example, the predetermined minimum duration of the ongoing chat is the same irrespective of the value of the chosen 'drink'. In an alternative embodiment, different 'drinks' within the available selection might have
20 different minimum time durations associated with them – more expensive 'drink' representing longer times for example. This could result in an 'auction', in that a number of different users could make varying offers to buy 'drinks' for a single other user. That single other user would then have to decide which offer to accept.

25 If User B declines the offer, the two users may nevertheless choose to continue to chat, or they may finish their conversation and look to initiate a conversation with another user (or simply log off the service). If the two users continue to chat, either one may subsequently offer the other a 'drink', which again might be accepted or declined.

If on the other hand User B accepts the offer of a 'drink' from User A, their conversation continues and so long as User B does not break off the conversation before the predetermined minimum time (as determined by the selected 'drink') has elapsed, the value of the 'drink' is transferred from User A's account to User B's account less a commission value which is collected by the operator of the service.

Once the predetermined minimum time has elapsed the users' conversation may continue and either one may offer to buy the other a drink subsequently, committing them to further conversation.

10 In an alternative embodiment of the invention, a 'drink' could be bought as a gift, in which case the user for whom the 'drink' was bought would not be obliged to chat for a predetermined time in order to collect the 'drink'.